

Transcript

Janet Michael

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day with a twist. Some of you are going to hear a familiar voice here in a second. We are on the Zooms today with, of course, either Brandy or Guy Curtis. Brandy Hawkins Boys is joining me today. She is Director of Public Relations and Special Events for the college. Leave Higoya is back with us. She is the Associate Vice President of Development and the Executive Director of the Laurel Ridge Education Foundation. And then the twist comes with our third guest today, which is Cynthia Schneider. She is the CEO at the Top of Virginia Regional Chamber. So a lot of hats going on in the Zoom rooms today, ladies. So Liv, let me start with you. We're going to talk today because Cynthia was recently awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award of 2026. So we're going to get in the weeds on that a little bit. But for someone who doesn't know that this award existed, that you give this award out at your foundation luncheon every year. Give me a little history and background.

Liv Heggoy

Yes, so the award has been given for over 40 years to someone in our community who has distinguished themselves in their career, through their service to the community, and just all in all is a wonderful role model for our college. And I have been with the college for 16 years, and about Fifteen years ago, we decided that part of the celebration of this honor, we would invite the recipient to come to our educational foundation luncheon each year, which just happened a couple of weeks ago. This is a very, very special event for our college, because it's one where donors and scholarship recipients are invited and to meet each other and really share the successes of this college and also what is possible through philanthropy. College is able to do so much more, thanks to wonderful donors in our community who support our programs and who support students through scholarships. And so it was such a joy to have Cynthia with us two Fridays ago to accept the award in person and really just to inspire all of our current students that learning is lifelong. And she is such a wonderful example of someone who has just advanced so much in her career, served her community. but is also an example of a lot of our students who returned to the college later in life. Here at Laurel Ridge, we have students here on campus who are 14 to 70 years old, so our doors are truly open to everyone. We were just really honored to have Cynthia with us to share her story.

Janet Michael

Cynthia, you and I have had many a conversation over the last, gosh, I've been hosting the show almost 10 years now as it is, and so we've talked a little bit about your history and where you came from and how you landed as CEO at the top of Virginia Regional Chamber. But for somebody who maybe missed some of those episodes, give me a little history, a little background. Explain to us how you landed here.

Cynthia Schneider

As a young stir. I started college at James Madison University. James Madison College at the time was there at a pivotal point in my life where I had just been introduced to the Bible. I was taking a Bible study course, decided I wanted to learn more about the Bible, so I shifted to a college in Kansas. Idealistically, it was a brand new college. It was not accredited yet. And I hear my father's voice in the background going, be careful. And I didn't care. All I was the idealism of chasing after God was all that I cared about. So I go, I got a great education there, but they never ended up getting accredited. And so my degree in the world did not hold much value. Then I got married, had children, life took over and never had an opportunity to go back and get the accreditation. And I landed in a wonderful career. I was an amazing opportunity to help a startup company. I started literally doing data entry. And at year 10, I became the director of operations. And I was there for 15 years as a director of operations. growing from 50 to 100% every year. I learned everything there was to learn about business there, which really prepared me for where I am today. That job ended abruptly after 25 years. I was 57 years old. My youngest child, I had four children, had just left home. So I was an empty nester, trying to feel my way. As a woman and a mother, what's left at this point? What's next? And then My career ended, and so it was one of the lowest points of my life. 57, you're kind of like, do I keep going? Do I go ahead and retire? And I looked at my mom, who was in her 80s at that point, and I realized I'm healthier than my mom is. I've lived a much easier life than my mom because of all the work that she did to pour into us children. And I thought, I'm going to probably live another 30 or 40 years based on my current situation, my genetics, those type of things. And so it just flipped a switch in me. I was like, I am not ready to slow down. I'm not ready to stop. But then I had to figure out what do I have to offer. And an opportunity to come to Laurel Ridge opened up. There was a grant where that's really important is I don't I don't think I felt it was important or appropriate for me to invest in myself financially. I was still helping my children get started in life. But that grant said, okay, well, if it's not going to cost me anything, it's not going to take away from my kids or my family, I'll go for it. And so I went back to school, started, and to get that accreditation, a little bit of validity to my skill set, I didn't know what I had to offer. I'd grown up in that business. I didn't really understand what I had to offer. And so starting over at Laurel Ridge was really like starting a new chapter of life. It helped me to turn the page. The 2 things I really stress about what being at

Laurel Ridge did for me and for one of my children particularly is it's a nurturing environment. Sometimes at the university level, it's not nurturing. When you go to a really large university, it's more of a weed out mentality in the early years. And so that nurturing environment and the affirmation that I receive of my skillset, those two things combined gave me the confidence to move forward. 'Cause at that point, it had been such a heartbreaking loss for me to leave my career that I didn't even have the ability emotionally to go on an interview for about six months. And then school started and I started gaining some confidence and my husband just kept saying, just keep putting yourself out there. Just take the next step. You don't know where it's going to lead. And that's literally what happened. I took the next step, an opportunity to interview with a previous co-worker's company where she had moved to, opened up, and someone in that interview, Anita Schull, if anyone knows Anita, passed my resume on to the chamber. And that's how I ended up at the chamber as a director of finance administration. And I describe it as this, it was a perfect fit for me, being able to give back to businesses. I understood what it took to build a business. So coming to the chamber just felt really full circle for me. But it was also, I wanted to kind of ride into the sunset in the background at that point in life. So one of the reasons this, sorry, I'm going to cry, I'm a crier, but this one is so meaningful to me because I would never, if you'd have asked me at that point in my life, would I someone think of me as a distinguished leader? I would have just shaken my head and laughed. There's no way I would have thought of myself that way. I'm better, more comfortable in the background. Both of my careers really have been prior to the chamber, my time in ministry and my time in especially food manufacturing were both helping someone else bring their vision to life. I've been a supportive leader right behind the person taking all the hits and taking the risk. And I'm great at supporting that person, but I have not typically been the person out front. And so it was a nice, comfortable place for me to be the director of finance administration in the background. And then when the opportunity to move into the CEO role came to be, that's a whole story in of itself and it's for another time. But that was a pivotal moment of me stepping out into a new calling in my life and a new embracing the opportunity to serve in bigger ways than I had ever been able to serve and give back before.

Janet Michael

You and I have had a lot of conversations over the years with students from Laurel Ridge that have similar stories to Cynthia. Either they were somebody in high school who didn't think they were going to be able to afford to even further their education to people who have completely changed their careers later in life. And their stories really do reflect a lot of Cynthia's journey. I think when she talks about how special Laurel Ridge is, that is it in a nutshell.

Brandy Hawkins Boies

100%, no one's path is straight. I've not met one single person here at the college student or staff or faculty that knew exactly what they were going to do. Everything works out as planned from the moment they're born and they just follow that path that doesn't exist. So the more that we hear stories like Cynthia's and they're just always inspiring me, the inspiration never stops. And as I've said in the past, I wish everyone held their story up as they walked around. And we knew everyone's story, but we don't have that privilege. We try to uncover as many as we can, but we just appreciate you sharing your story, Cynthia. It is so inspiring.

Janet Michael

Let's take a break when we come back. Cynthia, can we talk a little bit about what it looked like when you were taking your classes, about some of your classmates and things that you learned educationally along the way?

Cynthia Schneider

Yep, I love it.

Janet Michael

We're on the Zooms today for Laurel Ridge Community College Day. We are talking with Leave Higo. She is the Associate Vice President of Development for the college, as well as the Executive Director for the Laurel Ridge Education Foundation. Brandi Hawkins Boyce, of course, is with us as well. She is Director of Public relations and special events. Special guest joining us today is the distinguished alumni of 2026 for Laurel Ridge Community College, Cynthia Schneider. She is the CEO at the top of Virginia Regional Chamber. We're going to come back and talk more with all three of them in just a couple of minutes.

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Mueller will change the world. See the difference you can make. Sign up for service opportunities in your community. Visit justserve.org.

Janet Michael

Welcome back to the Valley. Today I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day here on the Zooms. Randy Hawkins voice. She is director of PR and special events for the college. Liv Hagoy is joining us. She is the associate vice president of development for the college, as well as the executive director for the Laurel Ridge Education Foundation. We're talking today with Cynthia Schneider. Many of you know Cynthia. She does the show on a fairly regular basis as CEO of the Topper Virginia Regional Chamber. But now I'm going to have to start reintroducing her as the distinguished alumni of Laurel Ridge for 2026 as well. Maria, in the first segment, you were telling us a little bit about your journey just to get to Laurel Ridge and then the impact that it's had once you graduated. Do you remember those early days? Do you remember the day that you went to your first class? What kind of memories do you have about that experience?

Cynthia Schneider

My most memorable moment that stands out to me, and it's kind of, you can teach an old dog new tricks. I'm sitting in the accounting class. Next to one of my son Caleb's, so who had just finished high school, so I'm sitting next to one of Caleb's best friends in accounting class, and I am feverishly writing notes. And he pulls out his cell phone and takes a picture of the board. And I looked at him and I was like, how smart is that? I did not grow up with technology. Even when I started my career in manufacturing, which was in the late 1980s, right? All we had the computer was the DOS. Remember the orange splashing DOS thing? That was all we had. My first fight I ever heard in the office was whether we should have a fax machine or not. Because the director of operations at the time thought that we would lose connection with our customers if we had a fax machine. By the time I ended that career, the fax machine was gone. The internet had started up. We were having emails. And that's so simple, yet it never crossed my mind. That was a really memorable moment. And I realized too, like, I can learn, I can learn these new things. I can adapt to new technologies. And so it was a funny and a confidence building moment that I can do this and be alongside one of my son's friends as it's just funny and comical and wonderful. So learning from each other. I think that's another thing that's really wonderful at Laurel Ridge is that intergenerational learning that I was able to provide insight and wisdom to some of the students that I connected with. And they were sure teaching me things as well.

Janet Michael

And that sitting next to your son's best friend isn't the only family connection that you ultimately ended up having with Laurel Ridge because your daughter went there as well, didn't she?

Cynthia Schneider

Yep, one of my daughters, Sarah, and her story is, again, highlights the importance of the nurturing atmosphere, but the rigorous academics that take place at Laurel Ridge. So Sarah, after her freshman year of high school, had a 1.9 grade point average. She got to high school. She met all these new friends. She had a blast. And she forgot to study. She's a very bright girl, but she'd always done well in school, but she's a social butterfly, and that took predominance. I didn't ever tell her, like, there's no way you're recovering from this, honey. I looked at it, it was like a 4.0 for the rest of her high school career would not even have gotten her to a 2.5. So we just kept encouraging and she got back on track and she did fine, but she was not looking at going to a university and she wasn't ready. She was still very playful at that point in life. And I think she would have probably gotten swallowed up in a big university. So she went to Laurel Ridge and in one of her first classes, one of her best friends, actually, his father was an English professor at Laurel Ridge. And he said to her, Sarah, this is a new beginning. doesn't matter what you've done in the past. This is a fresh new start. The past is gone. And she took it to heart. She found a study buddy who had actually had to drop out of another university her freshman year because her father said, I'm not paying for you to play. And so they decided they were going to change their life, and they became study buddies. And by the second semester, they were both on the dean's list. Sarah continued in that format, graduated from Laurel Ridge, went straight into with the guaranteed transfer program, which is amazing. She was able to walk right into James Madison University, got her degree in communications with a minor in adult education, and then was able to go on directly into her master's program. and has been an honors look program all but her first year at JMU. She made that transition to a little bit different style of learning at the university level, but she was ready and she went on from there and has been a very successful, she's had a tremendous career in instructional design, now is homeschooling her children, mother of five, and again, all of that from starting over herself at Laurel Ridge.

Janet Michael

Leith, I mentioned earlier in our conversation when I introduced Cynthia that I knew about her history and her path at Laurel Ridge because she's such a great spokesperson for that. She is one of the most down to earth people that you will likely ever meet and doesn't hesitate to tell people, oh no, this is where I was and this is what I did and look at where I am now. That's got to make it easier when you're trying to determine who's going to get this

award every year. How do you guys does get the nominations? How do you make those decisions?

Liv Heggoy

Well, thank you for asking that because we do in this community have so many successful alumni. Keep in mind about 80% of our graduates stay in this community after graduating, even if they go on to a four year. Ultimately they come back home, and so we have an enormous pool of distinguished alumni just waiting to be nominated, but they do need to be nominated by someone. So I encourage people to just take some time and submit a nomination. It's a very easy process. We have a form on our Web site. It's laurelridge.edu/alumni, pretty simple, and nominate them. And then a committee reviews them to select the recipient for any given year. But the most important part -- and I would say this just for all parts of life. We need to do everything we can to recognize people and thank them. And this is one way to thank, you know, so-and-so, she graduated. from either Lord Fairfax or Laurel Ridge, I need to just take a moment and recognize her. So laurelridge.edu stroke alumni.

Janet Michael

Do you have the list of previous awardees people that have won in the past?

Liv Heggoy

Yes, it's on our website. That same page. Truly it is. It's a great inspiring list of people from. all walks of life.

Janet Michael

I'll have to go look at that because I know a lot. I have quite a few of my friends, family, colleagues that I know have graduated from Laurel Ridge. Bill Daniel immediately comes to mind. So I don't know if Bill is a previous winner, but Mary, if you're listening, warn Bill, I'm going to nominate him.

Liv Heggoy

He is.

Janet Michael

And Cynthia, this is one of those double-edged swords I suspect for you because you are the greatest cheerleader of our community. I mean, the Chamber does the Greater Good Award. You just came off of handing out leadership awards, entrepreneur awards, all of those kinds of things. And you are 100% all in for recognizing other people for their

accomplishments. So I can imagine how this was a little wonky for you having to be that person this time.

Cynthia Schneider

Yeah, I just still don't see myself as anything but an ordinary girl working hard. So for someone to recognize that or to have some of my colleagues that I've worked alongside really closely chairs of our board and committee folks that have reached out to me. And they've really seen the inside out of my leadership of the hard times and the good times. And I want to say to them, your community has helped make you what you are, right? The support that you get from the people around you that have seen more in me than I see in myself, that come alongside me and give me wise counsel so that I can make good decisions and lead well. This is not something you get alone, right? You share with those that are around you. That helps me accept it a little better is to know that I'm honoring the people that work alongside me and the work that they do in the community as well.

Janet Michael

You shared a story with us during the break about when you gave your speech that day when you accepted the award and the people that came up to you after the diversity and the people that came up to you afterwards, I could see you as I do, I can see you thinking, okay, this is why it's a good thing for me to have gotten this award. Sometimes it's hard to still swallow that ourselves, but being able to then share that out and have that impact has always been your goal.

Cynthia Schneider

It is. I mentioned I had a young person, a middle-aged person, and an older woman, all three age groups that came up and said they were inspired by my story. And At this season, this chapter in my life, that's really what it's all about. And it's really what I want to say to other, particularly speaking to women, but people in my age bracket, as Kim shared with everyone, I just celebrated my 69th birthday, so I'm moving into my 70th year of living. And I don't want to slow down. I feel like I'm just starting. You gain all this amazing wisdom and experience that you can share with people that are coming behind you that I want to pass the baton and help them avoid the pitfalls that I've made, learn from my mistakes so maybe they won't have to hit the ground so hard. So that's how I see this chapter of life is this opportunity now to really give back. It's such a beautiful place to be. I can remember as a young woman, especially as a young mom with four little ones, counting every penny in life and being more on the receiving side than the giving side, potentially as far as financial. And so to be on the other side of that in life, to have the opportunity to give freely and nothing's riding on it. I just to get to give freely. If I don't like something, I'm going to go

another direction now. It's a beautiful season of life, a place to get to, and just glad to be here and glad to be able to help other people along the way.

Liv Heggoy

I would just add that it's just never too late. If someone listening is like, I don't know that I want to get a degree, maybe just take a class. We have lots of different interesting classes in humanities or science or professional development. Maybe you just don't know Excel like you should, or maybe you are a do-it-yourselfer and need learn how to weld. It's a great place for learning whatever that means to you.

Cynthia Schneider

Yeah. Yes.

Janet Michael

It's almost like you've listened to the show before leave because Guy Curtis and I have had many a conversation about how I cannot figure out Excel to save my life. And every single time he's like, you know, we have a class for that, right?

Cynthia Schneider

Oh, Janet, Excel is like my best friend. It is my right hand. That's how I keep life. I don't think of myself always as a creative, but I am like an idea person. I always got 900 ideas and 900 thoughts and how do I get them all down and Excel is how I get like, I get everything out there and then I can bring it down to something actionable. I just love to sell. Danita Roble, my co-worker, doctor of membership development, she laughs at me because I'll just look at her and she knows I've got the spreadsheet out.

Janet Michael

The person for me for that is Beth Falu at Navy Federal. So whenever I need anything that goes into a spreadsheet, that's also the downside is I don't necessarily have to know it because I can e-mail Beth and say, hey, can you put all of this into a spreadsheet for me? So yeah, it makes it a little complicated.

Liv Heggoy

I would also say we're always looking for instructors too. So as an adjunct in any of our divisions or in our professional development, Cynthia, maybe you need to come and teach Excel. Wow.

Cynthia Schneider

I don't know about that, but I will say there's a couple of softwares I've used in my life that I thought, if I in this career, I could just go work for them because I asked so many questions. I know it's so inside out.

Janet Michael

So Brandi, as we wrap up, somebody's listening today and we have renewed their inspiration. or their hope. Can they register? What does that process look like? When can they do it? Give me the details for that.

Brandy Hawkins Boies

Registration for fall 2026 just opened. That is for our credit classes. However, our workforce continuing education classes are registering year round. I would recommend to start your exploration. Go to laurelridge.edu/visit. It's a great page if you'd like to request to come to campus and walk around or you can reach out to our outreach specialist directly. You can click on our different pathways and explore the type of either degrees, credentials that are under those pathways. So that's a great page to get a nice snapshot to start.

Janet Michael

And I always like to remind people that it is also not your old school community college anymore because you can do classes online. You don't have to come to the campus either in Middletown or Fauquier or the Luray Page Center. You can do some things in different ways now.

Brandy Hawkins Boies

Absolutely. we have all different modes of courses being offered, as you said, online, in person, different days of the week, different times. And Janet?

Cynthia Schneider

That's actually a part of why I was able to go back and continue because I started in January and then I started my career at the chamber in the following May. And so then I'm working full time and I want to finish what I've started. So I had hybrid courses and that was so helpful to be able to do a lot in the evenings, early mornings, weekends, and then you still go in at times to have the connection and that face-to-face learning that I still think is really, really valuable.

Janet Michael

Cynthia, let me just say congratulations. I am not at all surprised and I am very proud of you.

Cynthia Schneider

Thank you so much.

Janet Michael

And leave, tell me one more time, where can people go to see that alumni list and maybe nominate somebody? Go to our website, laurelridge.edu forward slash alumni. And Brandy, where do they go to get more details about registration or just getting a tour?

Brandy Hawkins Boies

Laurelridge.edu/visit.

Janet Michael

Thank you, ladies. I appreciate your time today.

Cynthia Schneider

Thank you, Janet. Thank you, Liv.

Janet Michael

Thank you. We're going to learn about Tablesapes, a really cool fundraiser that Wheels for Wellness is having next week. We're going to get the details for that on the show tomorrow. So meet me back here for that just a few minutes after noon.